MINIMALISM AS AN INNER MOVEMENT

The way soundtracks resonate with intimate feelings and emotions on the screen, using essential melodic elements.

Abstract

This research is about how movie soundtrack composers use writing techniques from minimalism and post-minimalism style to get a strong emotional engagement with viewers and listeners. After. looking for some literature in minimalism, I compared it to scores and audio tracks from contemporary composers I aesthetically feel close to. That's the first step of a long work on score-analysis, focusing on elements I could work on in my own personal composition style. So I decided to make experimentations writing music for original and existing movie-scenes as well, trying to apply ideas, techniques, and creative suggestions I came across in my research.

Introduction

While for many years in cinema history soundtracks have seemed to be thought as a real-time comment to the scene. Recently music has come to a background role behind action and dialogues, finding a sort of independence of it's own. The turning point comes in the very moment composers started looking for a deeper interaction with character's feelings and the viewer's perceptions and emotions as well. In order to build up a stronger relationship between sound and intimate feelings of the viewer, composers found different writing techniques and approaches. One of them is a new form of bespoke minimalist music for screen.

Literature Review

According to Kyle Gann, the endeavor to define minimalism in music poses a significant challenge, particularly due to the reluctance of minimalist composers to embrace the term. A common perception, rooted in the early works of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley, frames minimalism as repetitive music characterized by incessant repetition of melodic or rhythmic figures with gradual changes. However, this simplistic characterization overlooks important precursors such as La Monte Young's drone improvisations.The main feature of minimalist compositions is the pervasive use of repetition building a propulsive dynamism that enhances the music with profound potency. Evolving and growing dynamics through a piece engender a palpable sense of progression and maturation over the course of the composition. Drones, sustained sonorities, are another hallmark of minimalist music, exemplified by Niblock, Glass, and Reich. While some categorize minimalist music into pulse-based and drone-based types, this distinction often depends on instrumentation rather than compositional intent. Kyle Gann discusses the concept of gradual process in early minimalism, highlighting its role as a novel perceptual challenge for listeners. One common approach was additive process, exemplified by Philip Glass, where patterns would start with a basic repetition and gradually add or subtract notes. Steve Reich employed phase-shifting, where identical phrases played at slightly different tempos create a shifting effect. Permutational process, seen in works by Jon Gibson and Tom Johnson, involved systematic transformations of melodic progressions to prevent exact repetition. Once applied to movie scenes, minimalist music creates space, a quite consistent sequence of layers of sound, dealing with the "corporeal" element of a sound. This gives a different sound effect to dialogues, reflections and soliloquies. Minimalism often gives to the composer a key to underline dramatic tension, emphasizing not only action, but basically the inner sensations and emotion world of emotions living and fighting each other in a character. It

has the capacity to convey or imply the passage of time in movies, enabling audiences to perceive temporal progression in a manner that is profoundly impactful.

Methodology

My method starts with a deep analysis of the music scores by Philipe Glass, La Monte Young and Steve Reich, going deep in examples by Kyle Gann and Keith Potter in “The ashgate research companion to minimalist and post minimalist music.”More then melodies I try to focus on the use of modal harmony, as a jazz composer, getting aware I can do the same while trying to alter moods and dramas during a movie scene. After that I get aware I can apply my knowledge coming from large jazz arrangements to movie scenes, using counterpoint and harmony in a different way from composers coming from classical composition and conduction studies. Then, before making experiments on writing I try to coniugate fragments from scores and listenings to soundtracks to make a compromise, and that results easier than expected. In the end it all comes to applying ideas and fragments inspired by minimalist composers to new scores for existing movies as a writing stimulating exercise.

Case Studies and Examples

Minimalism unconsciously recalls to a dark, melancholic and dramatic mood. That’s the reason why I’ve been searching for movies in the same atmosphere, with soundtracks consistent with that idea. That’s what Stephen Cole defines “*[…] an austere piano concerto*” referring to the soundtracks by Clint Mansell on the movie “Last night” by Massy Tadjedin. Evolving repetition is the basic element in the track “*Final Movement*” that underlines the dramatic and sad ending of the movie. Similar composing ideas are in Ennio Morricone’s “*La migliore offerta*” and Christopher Bear’s “*See you*” from “*Past Lives*”. Mainly no dialogues sad ending scenes of dramatic/romantic movies. On the other hand Jon Brion uses a very short orchestral music over a dialog in “*Eternal sunshine of a spotless mind*” using timber, harmony and dynamic as strong expressive instruments. He gives narrative power to the whole scena as he never takes the risk to put words out of focus. The final scene of “Her” by Spike Jonze reminds to the same idea, with the track “*Dimensions*” written and performed by Arcade Fire in a permanent dialogue with the final soliloquy by Theodor. After finding relevant similarities in the approaches by different film composers using minimalism for enhancing quite similar moods next step is about understanding about my own personal approach.

Limitations

Differently from classical music, working on contemporary music scores gets harder, especially when the score itself doesn’t say enough about music, or in many cases the whole orchestral score is missing. A way to get over it has been direct transcription from records, as it happens quite often for jazz composers and arrangers.

Analysis goals and approaches

Trying to analyze soundtracks I got strongly and deeply involved with, I found out significant similarities between each one. Music is not surrounding the scene anymore, it moves out from the background and resonates with how what happens on the scene makes us feel. The fourth wall breaks and the score gets closer to the viewer. This happens through the repetition of a pattern with small fragments of variations moving the score forward and spinning around at the same time. So here comes a practical question about writing music scores like these. How does it work? How to recreate deep engagement atmospheres around images and moving pictures? Ho to build resonance with the audience? How to represent feelings and emotions in an absolute way that goes further descriptive music? I decided so to go deeper into analysis of existing soundtracks, trying to incorporate some new elements in my personal composing style, in order to put my compositions on an high interaction level with viewers and listeners. Composition and Experimentations

Composition and experimentation

Moving from music to emotions has been a useful and successful method for analysis, but being a composer I need to move the other way around while imagining, writing, performing and producing brand new original music for a film. That's what I plan to be working on, writing and orchestrating for small and large ensembles in a deep relationship with ambient and moods going beyond scenes and dialogues.

Conclusion

More than each one of us is ready to accept, music is about what happens inside the viewer, more than inside of each character on the screen. That's the inner movement that resonates through music and goes deeper than motion pictures finding emotions and memories sometimes we still cannot call them by their name.These are the topics I'd like to apply my knowledge of musician and composer, open to new discoveries and future professional challenges.

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